



HUGH LEWIN tells how the TRC “manages the package”.

YOU’VE got a submission of about 150, say 200, statements which have been solicited, which have been brought in from the statement takers in the area. They come in and they sit there, and you go through them. How do you then choose the 10 or 12 people who are going to appear on that particular day from that particular place? This is our brief. Cover everywhere. Go throughout the country. So how do you choose? You have two kids who were protesting. One is dead and the mother comes forward and tells the story of how the child died. One is crippled, is still alive, exactly the same situation — shot, but survived and has been crippled for the last 10, 15 years. Which do you choose? Which is the story that we say that you should hear? How do you choose between another hostel attack or another death in detention — another detention through torture?

Do you choose a well-known local politician who died as an activist, because that is going to please the community and that is going to make the community feel more involved in the process? Or do you choose someone who died who was a domestic worker who happened to be walking down the streets when the Hippos arrived? That for me has been the most difficult and the most painful process, because in fact what we are doing is managing the package in a way. And I think that is what we have all been doing in terms of

reporting — is taking a package and managing it and then sending it forth.

The Commission itself is, in fact, not the end of a process which is neatly going to deliver national reconciliation and national unity. It is only the beginning of a process in which we are all involved, and which has to be picked up. I maintain that the major challenge for us as jour-

nalists is that we are the first people who are going to have to pick up this and take the work forward once the Commission has finished its work — once the Commission has made this monumental report, which is going to be written hastily between December and March next year, and then presented in its 3 000 volumes to the president.

It is a great story. I don’t think journalists have ever been presented with a story like this. Every single day you get the best copy in town.

You have copy which is local, you have copy which is alive, you have copy which is heartrending, which is tearing, which is a challenge to approach. It is the best story that has ever hit South Africa in media terms, in copy terms. But how are you going to maintain the momentum of covering where you have a relentless repetition of horror? How does one actually cope with that?

Hugh Lewin is a member of the TRC Human Rights Violations Committee.

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VOICES



“Remember the TRC’s obligations,” Advocate DENZIL POTGIETER appeals to journalists.

WE NEED a more critical and analytical coverage of the work we are doing. We are all very busy, we are all falling around all over, and we need that sort of more in-depth look — philosophical look if you wish — into the work we are doing. Of course we have two competing interests.

There is the duty of the media to keep the public informed and the public’s right to know, on the one hand. On the other hand there is the TRC’s statutory duties to keep certain information confidential.

We have, as a Commission, gone on record to make it quite clear that we are not interested in heavy-handed action, or in witchhunts, but of course we need to look at this quite critically, because we have the right of the public to know on the one side, but then we have our duty towards the victims, which we regard very, very seriously.

An untimely disclosure of the identity of an applicant for amnesty or of circumstances surrounding an amnesty application, can pose a threat to the applicant. The Commission has a duty to be sensitive to that. An important consideration is where this sort of conduct impedes our work. Where it interferes with our work, we are bound to preserve the integrity of the TRC process. We must then look at ways and means of overcoming this sort of problem. We need some discussion on

this and we need to have some understanding. I think that our record has shown that we are committed to making information available. We are committed as far as is practically possible to transparency.

We have realised that the question of reconciliation, which is the second leg of our mandate, should be emphasised more than it has been up to now, and that we should focus more of our work towards that goal. We accept that the TRC won’t deliver reconciliation. At best we can put this on the national agenda.

We also need to focus more on reparation in order to balance the situation which has arisen through the granting of amnesty to perpetrators of gross human rights violations. A difficulty has developed in black communities in particular, who see that amnesty is granted to perpetrators for murder, for all sorts of gross abuses. They walk free. They are released from prison. But the victims of those crimes don’t see anything happening. They don’t see any change in their circumstances. They form the view that this process is more geared towards perpetrators. It pays off as far as perpetrators are concerned, but there is nothing concrete, nothing tangible insofar as victims are concerned. We have taken note of that. And for that reason we need to have a greater focus on reparations and rehabilitation.

Denzil Potgieter is the commissioner in charge of media matters at the TRC.

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Articles excerpted from presentations to the Media, Truth and Reconciliation workshop in Cape Town, February 1997.